

Curtains Up Theater Review . . . By Camille Bounds: Delightful, deadly fun: SVCT's 'A Gentleman's Guide' is a killer comedy

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Every role was filled with perfection.



The cast of SVCT's "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder." Photo courtesy SVCT/Elizabeth Mandel

By Camille Bounds

Manslaughter has never been so delightfully mischievous! South Valley Civic Theatre's production of "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" is a wickedly clever, uproariously funny musical comedy that will leave you dying with laughter.

This Tony Award-winning show is a triumphant display of local talent, inspired direction, and technical brilliance. Directed and choreographed by Tressa Bender, the witty romp is an absolute enchantment from start to finish with a laugh-out-loud comical story. It runs four weekends until May 18 at Morgan Hill's downtown Community Playhouse.

Based on the 1907 novel "Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal" by Roy Horniman (which also inspired the classic 1949 film "Kind Hearts and Coronets"), "A Gentleman's Guide" follows the story of "Monty Navarro" (played by the charming Chris Brady), a poor commoner who discovers he is ninth in line to become the Earl of Highhurst.



Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

Determined to claim his birthright, Monty sets out to eliminate the eight D'Ysquith family members standing in his way, all played by the immensely versatile Ray D'Ambrosio. He does this while juggling the affections of two very different women, the middle-class "Sibella Hallward" (played by Michelle Vera) and aristocratic "Phoebe D'Ysquith" (played by Lucy Nino). Other parts are played by Jenn Oliphant, Verose Deslonde, Stacia Stuart, Shawna Gonzales, Leslie Oesteruch, Michael Grimm, John Brewer, and Logan Jenkins.

The SVCT production benefits from pitch-perfect casting, with each actor fully embodying their roles. The lead performers deliver strong, often operatic vocals that do justice to the clever lyrics and catchy melodies. The entire ensemble brings energy and commitment to their parts, making even the smallest characters memorable.

Bender's direction keeps the action moving at a brisk, engaging pace, navigating the show's dark humor and complex plot with a sure hand. Her choreography is

lively and inventive, making full use of the stage and the actors' abilities.

The production values are equally impressive, with detailed sets by Jenn Oliphant and Shachar Shem-Tov, gorgeous period costumes by Lorraine Bell, and effective lighting by Jenn Oliphant. Music Director Ron Bowman leads a tight 11-piece orchestra that perfectly captures the show's varied musical styles.

While the first act is a bit long, the witty dialogue, tuneful songs, and surprising plot second act is a non-stop rollercoaster of twists keep the audience engaged throughout. The revelations and reversals leading to a satisfying, if slightly macabre, conclusion.

Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

If there are any awards offered for this production, one should be given to whoever was in charge of casting. Every role was filled with perfection. The leads' voices showcased superb opera-trained quality. The entire cast gave full honesty and energy to their parts and seemed to be having the time of their lives. SVCT is fortunate to have such an amazing treasure trove of talent. And they know how to use it! Kudos also to the backstage crew who provided multiple scene changes that went smoothly and set pieces slid in place without a hitch.

With music by Steven Lutvak, lyrics by Lutvak and Robert L. Freedman, and a book by Freedman, "Gentleman's Guide" premiered on the Great White Way at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Nov. 17, 2013. It enjoyed a successful run until Jan. 17, 2016. At the 68th Annual Tony Awards, the Broadway production garnered an impressive four Tony Awards, the most prestigious being the coveted Best Musical prize.

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" is a hugely entertaining, wonderfully performed production that showcases the depth of talent in our local theater community. It's a must-see for anyone who appreciates engaging musical theater, black comedy, or just a thoroughly enjoyable night out. Catch it before Monty Navarro eliminates your chance!

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ON THE BILL. South Valley Civic Theatre's production of "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" features (from left) Michelle Vera as Sibella Hallward, Chris Brady as Monty Navarro and Lucy Nino as Phoebe D'Ysquith.

Love & Murder

CIVIC THEATRE'S LATEST PRODUCTION OPENS APRIL 26 IN MORGAN HILL

ELIZABETH MANDEL
 Contributor

South Valley Civic Theatre's "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" opens April 26 and runs select days through May 18 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

Winner of four Tony awards including best musical, "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" centers on charming but low-born Monty Navarro (played by Chris Brady) who is informed after the death of his mother that he is ninth in line to inherit the earldom Highhurst and the fortune of the wealthy D'Ysquith banking family.

Monty sets out to systematically murder his not-so-nice D'Ysquith relatives (all eight of whom are played by Ray D'Ambrosio), with the goal of becoming the ninth Earl of Highhurst. Meanwhile, Monty is trying to woo money-minded Sibella Hallward (played by Michelle Vera)—until he finds himself drawn to young Phoebe D'Ysquith (played by Lucy Nino).

SVCT has embraced this witty, wacky, award winning, musical comedy with their own creative spin. Self-proclaimed "Disney Adult" Director, Tressa Bender, has always admired the show's dark humor and decided to pay homage to a popular ride at her favorite theme park that

adopts the same humor as one travels through its mansion.

Jenn Oliphant was able to bring these haunted elements to

life with a set that is just as much a delight as the show itself.

The laugh-out-loud theatrical experience features returning SVCT faces as well as some new ones. Featuring a strong cast of 12 performers who navigate complex harmonies, impeccable comedic timing and some of the fastest set and costume changes known to theater, spectators are guaranteed to have a great time.

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" will run for 10 performances, April 26-May 18, including selected Fridays and Saturday evenings at 8pm, and selected Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2pm.

For information and tickets, visit svct.org/2024_gentleman.

Elizabeth Mandel is the vice president of publicity for South Valley Civic Theatre.

Entertainment: SVCT's 'Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder' is hilarious farce

Award-winning musical opens April 26 at the Morgan Hill Playhouse

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From left: Michelle Vera as Sibella Hallward, Chris Brady as Monty Navarro, and Lucy Nino as Phoebe D'Ysquith in SVCT's production of a "Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder." Photo courtesy Chris Foster

By Calvin Nuttall

Homicide has never been so delightfully humorous as in the musical "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder." The South Valley Civic Theatre show opens April 26.

This Tony Award-winning musical comedy takes audiences on a farcical romp with the charmingly wicked killer "Monty Navarro," portrayed by Chris Brady. Navarro finds himself ninth in line to inherit the title of Earl of Highhurst. He decides to eliminate, one by one, the other eight heirs (all played by Ray D'Ambrosio) standing in his way.

“A ‘hero’s journey’ is the wrong word for it,” Brady said. “It’s more like a villain’s journey. You do root for the villain, and he is the ‘hero’ of the story even though he is a murderer. It’s funny, it’s punchy, and the music is just awesome.”

Destitute and recently orphaned, Navarro’s life is suddenly turned upside-down when it is revealed his mother was a disowned member of the wealthy and powerful D’Ysquith family, making him an heir to the title of Earl of Highhurst. The family, however, refuses him, denying the legitimacy of his claim. So he does the natural thing and decides to kill the ones who stand in his way.

“All eight of these D’Ysquiths are horrible people,” said director Tressa Bender. “So you kind of root for the murderer. They all kind of embody a type of human you won’t like. And it is all done to fun music.”

Murdering his way to wealth and power is not the only thing motivating Monty: love is also a factor. He is smitten with “Sibella Hallward” (Michelle Vera), but she is uninterested in marrying him due to his poverty, and she has turned to other options.

“The woman he loves is abandoning him for a young man who is rich and has all of the trappings of wealth,” Brady said. “It’s 1907 and he’s got a motorcar – that kind of wealth.”

The show takes place on a stage within a stage, as Navarro recounts his exploits from his jail cell while he composes his memoir, also titled “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder.” As our narrator throughout the story, Brady remains onstage for nearly the entire show.

“Finding the actors with the acumen to pull off these characters was a challenge,” Bender said. “They are some of the most difficult roles, I think, in musical theater.”

The rapid-fire costume changes and multiple different characters all played by the versatile D’Ambrosio brings a unique element of farcical chaos to the action, he said about his roles.

“It’s exceedingly busy,” he said. “There are nine characters, including several I jump back and forth between. There are several costume changes, some of which are really fast, like 30 seconds or less. That’s going to be an interesting exercise.”

After a certain point in the show, once the audience sees D’Ambrosio return to the stage as yet another new character, they can guess what is coming next: another murder. But despite this, the show manages to keep a viewer on their toes, Bender said.

“Even though you know he’s going to die, there is still some shock to it, there is still surprise at every turn,” she said.

An experienced actor and long-time fan of the show, D’Ambrosio said he was ecstatic when SVCT announced it would be auditioning for “A Gentleman’s Guide.”

“This role has been on my bucket list,” D’Ambrosio said. “There are guns and poisons and bees and drownings, and no two deaths are the same. That’s what makes this role so much fun, is that I have to try my best to create nine distinct characters and nine distinct deaths. I only have one voice, of course, but I have to bend and twist it in a bunch of different ways. That’s a big part of the fun.”